



## Expert Comment

A branch of the Bank of China in the city of Shenzhen. (Credit: Yue Lan/Bigstockphoto.com)

# China's rise and Chinese values: China's growing influence and its critics

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# China's rise and Chinese values: China's growing influence and its critics

Berthold Kuhn

*China exerts growing influence around the world. On the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the People's Republic of China, we have witnessed extensive media coverage of China's rising economic and political power. Chinese values have also received growing attention in the context of Chinese business and Chinese people going global. China's rise will impact societies across the globe, including in Western Europe and the United States, where China's growth tends to face mounting resistance and scepticism. Much political commentary has stressed China's differences with the West and underemphasised the many social changes Chinese society has undergone over the last 70 years. Young generations in East and West have more in common in some respects than one would think from reading Western editorials over the last week, and a healthy future dialogue would be supported by correcting this imbalance.*

## Introduction

The European Commission (2019) labelled China “a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance” and many key players in politics and business followed suit. A policy brief from the Federation of German Industries (BDI, 2019) on cooperation with China begins with a paragraph on “the challenge of systemic competition”.<sup>1</sup> Anxiety is perhaps one of the dominant political feelings in Western societies about the growing influence of China.

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<sup>1</sup> “A competition is emerging between our system of a liberal, open and social market economy and China's state-dominated economy. Politicians, society and the business community in Germany and Europe need a broad public discussion and orientation on this challenge” (BDI, 2019).

Others, however, are curious and eager to understand the values of Chinese consumers and to benefit from the growing Chinese market.

### **Disconnects between perspectives on China**

What could we expect from a strong China and how is China's growing strength reflected in our media? This paper argues that: (1) we see a significant disconnect between perceptions on China, depending on the focus of analysis; and (2) we should try harder to understand Chinese values in order to bridge perspectives between different civilisations.

To some extent, different perspectives on China are understandable and reflect different types of interests and different levels of engagement with China. The disconnect between economic and political perspectives explains that media coverage on China oscillates between 'Panda hugging' (embracing the opportunities of the Chinese market and praising the effectiveness of policy-implementation in China) and 'China bashing' (pinpointing China's authoritarian style of governance, referring to its notorious human rights violations, and indulging in political alarmism with regard to China's growing influence).

### **The economic perspective**

In the context of China's 70th anniversary, economic coverage of China's development focuses on China's tremendous growth story. Its economy is worth \$14 trillion. However, we also read that growth rates in 2019 are the weakest in three decades and we hear a number of experts even questioning official growth figures of around 6.2%, the official growth rate in the second quarter of 2019. Yet, for an economy of this size, even more moderate growth rates are considered to be impressive, particularly in the context of a serious trade war with the largest economy in the world in terms of nominal GDP figures.

In terms of GDP purchasing power, China has already overtaken the United States as the largest economy in the world. China's middle class amounts to more than 400 million people, outnumbering the United States and Europe. According to the World Bank, more than 850 million *people* have lifted themselves *out* of extreme *poverty* in China over recent decades.

### **Political debates**

Political debates on China focus on the accomplishments of China's grand historical ambitions, as well as on many critical developments. In a debate at the Mercator Institute for China studies,<sup>2</sup> Europe's largest China think tank – known for its critical attitude on political and social development in China – renowned academics around Director Frank Pieke discussed the role, mission, and accomplishments of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) over the past 70 years. The CCP's original mission focused as much on national unity and making China great again as on social development and social justice. The panel concluded that social inequalities have dramatically risen, even though most people – from a materialistic point of view – are better off. Currently, party leadership engages in nationalistic discourses in an effort to downplay growing social cleavages in society and to remind its citizens that great ambitions require a great struggle involving all sections of society under the leadership of the CCP.

Few international experts in long-time affluent Western countries grasp the significance of China's accomplishments in terms of poverty eradication. China has made tremendous progress in overcoming poverty. In this regard, it has earned a great deal of respect around the world, especially in developing countries, perhaps with the exception of India, which perceives China as a political rival and proudly refers to its pluralist democratic

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<sup>2</sup> The debate took place at MERICS in Berlin on 26 September 2019.

system although the current political leadership also exhibits many authoritarian features, for example in Kashmir.

### **Beyond Fukuyama's *End of History***

China's birthday party coincides with 30 years of the fall of the wall that marked the end of the communist regime in East Germany. The developments in Russia and Eastern Europe in the last 1980s urged Francis Fukuyama to write about "the end of history" (Fukuyama, 1992). What he meant was that liberal democracy was about to become the final form of government for all countries.

30 years later, the situation looks different. Fukuyama wrote another bestselling political analysis in the meantime, this time on "identity politics" (Fukuyama, 2018), focusing on the crisis of social cohesion in liberal democracies. It took not much longer than seven years after the fall of the Berlin Wall for gloomy outlooks on confrontations between civilisations to make a comeback in world politics. Huntington's "clash of civilisations" (1992, 1996) is a much contested theory of civilisational development but also a major reference point for many initiatives, including the dialogue of civilisations.

In the 1990s, human rights issues were on the way forward. The World Conference on Human Rights was held in Vienna in 1993, for example. Laudable efforts were underway to bridge different perspectives on human rights, resulting from the divide between political and civil rights on the one hand and economic, social, and cultural rights on the other hand. Following much advocacy work from a flourishing NGO sector, the International Criminal Court (ICC) was established by the Rome Statute in 1998, and it began sitting on 1 July 2002, after 60 countries had ratified the Statute. The court's work initially received mostly positive attention but 20 years later its reputation appears seriously damaged and the old human rights divide between political and civil rights versus economic, social, and cultural rights seems to have re-emerged.

## **The divide on human rights perspectives**

The *New York Times*, still a key source of Western analysis on China, keeps the human rights debate alive and presents much critical reporting on China. In some Western media, reporting on critical issues seems to absorb most of the attention. Human rights are definitely back on the agenda. The arrest of Muslims in Xinjiang, and the protests of the “democracy movement” in Hong Kong are making the headlines currently.

China looks at these issues from a different angle. Hong Kong’s activists are seen as being instigated by radical forces and motivated by frustrations over slow economic development and the decline of Western dominance. This point of view is indeed shared by most people in mainland China, including younger generations.

Chinese political analysts close to the government refer to the many casualties that occurred in the context of military interventions led by the United States in recent decades. They go on in saying that many governments in the West are seen as incapable of protecting their citizens from crimes and social marginalisation.

Political pluralism has lost much of its appeal in China. The style of government in the United States and the United Kingdom supports the argument of the pitfalls of liberal democracy, which have accentuated social divisions and led to political confrontations and even political chaos in the eyes of many Chinese.

## **Anxiety about China’s growing political influence**

The protest movement in Hong Kong, however, painfully reminds China that the appeal of its political systems and style of governance – despite its technological progress and economic growth – provokes strong resentment among those who have grown up in more liberal democracies.

Anxiety about China’s growing political influence has not only spread in Hong Kong or Western countries but also among some Asian and African countries entering into closer

partnerships with China in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China might still view itself as an emerging economy seeking to regain a place in world politics that corresponds with its population, size, and the fame of its ancient civilisation. In many countries, however, we are witnessing calls to confront or at least contain China's dominance.

In the leading Berlin daily, *Der Tagesspiegel*, Christoph von Marschall's editorial on the occasion of China's 70th birthday (1 October 2019) focuses on the negative aspects of China and what people in Germany associate with China's growing influence and expected dominance in world politics. In some respects, though, he is wrong, or perhaps, simply ignorant, when he criticises China's lack of commitment to promoting sustainable development and advancing climate protection.

A contrasting perspective is found in *From Zero Hero*, a book on China's efforts to become a global leader in climate politics (Stensdal, 2012). Today, China is the largest emitter of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, but it has also become the biggest investor in renewable energies, promoted low-carbon development across the country, leapfrogged in clean energy, and is leading in electro-mobility and the implementation of green practices in urban development. It has made the most significant contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda, building on its contributions made to the Millennium Development Goals and promoting the concept of 'ecological civilisation', which was written into the constitution in March 2018.

### **Chinese values**

In the field of culture and civilisation, China gets the highest respect for its ancient traditions and values. Chinese culture is older than 5,000 years and Chinese cultural history has enormous diversity. It is rich in arts and sciences, in painting and printing techniques, in architecture, in pottery, and sculpture. *China's* rich cuisine is world famous.

Confucian ethics of virtues, Taoism and Buddhism have all left deep impressions on beliefs and images associated with Chinese culture and tradition. In the 20th century, Mao Zedong aimed to turn Chinese traditions and values upside down.

The open door policy initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 in a way revived traditional Chinese values. The revolutionary rhetoric of the Maoist revolutionary spirit lost its appeal and Confucian values experienced a renaissance. With deeper integration into the world economy, China started to embrace some Western concepts of economic liberalisation and reform too. It overhauled its legal and administrative system, drawing on the practices of OECD countries.

In the context of China's economic rise, its social and political values have undergone significant changes. Mao had mistrusted the bureaucratic state and attributed a strong role to revolutionary party forces. His successors assigned a much more important role to government administration in an effort to strengthen capacities for the implementation of policy reforms. Xi Jinping seeks to combine the two: strengthening ideological and political oversight by the party while further reforming and capacity-building government administration.

### **Values and vested interests**

China's cultural and political values, however, have not received much attention in Western political circles. The foreign and security policies of the US and Europe are driven by vested geostrategic and economic interests. China's rise is considered a threat to Western dominance. In Russia, attitudes seem to be more pragmatic, characterised by an understanding of mutual non-interference in domestic politics. A focus on joint economic development has gained more and more traction in Russian-Chinese relations.

In business, China's growing market continues to attract worldwide attention, including in Europe and especially in times when foreign policy agendas cast a shadow over

trade relations. There is a growing concern that China might strike back in many ways, even though it has positioned itself as a firm supporter of globalisation. Would Chinese people continue to buy European products? For many industries, e.g., the German car industry, China is the number one market. Most of the major multinational companies, but also many medium-sized and some small enterprises have entered the Chinese market in recent decades and are keen on understanding the Chinese people and the Chinese consumer in particular.

Political news sometimes reports on the swift reactions of Chinese consumers to advertisement campaigns of Western companies that show little sensitivity to Chinese feelings. Daimler had to withdraw a Dalai Lama quote which it used in its marketing campaign and decided to apologise to the Chinese consumer audience, which created an outcry among some German media (e.g., Li and Jourdan, 2018).

Surveys on political values in China confirm that government agencies, in particular at central level, enjoy a relatively high level of trust, compared with Western countries. Business – naturally – is more concerned with values related to lifestyles and consumption. Trend Bureau and the consulting firms Kantar and Avantgarde have made a collaborative effort to develop a Chinese Consumer Value index based on social media analysis following the model of the value index in Germany, which has become a compass for the meaning and relevance of web-user values since 2009.

### **Are Chinese values so different?**

Research on Chinese consumer values revealed that success, security, and health top the value index, followed by simplicity, freedom, and nature (Li, Wippermann, Krüger, and Han, 2019). The attention paid to the top concern is not surprising. Chinese eagerness to rise is evident in many fields. The connotations of certain terms might differ between cultures and

languages, but the results still suggest that value trends in China are not as different from Germany as perhaps expected.

According to the index, current value changes are markers of the transformation from the industrial to the network economy. Trends of freelance work and individual travel reflect a growing emphasis on freedom-oriented lifestyles. The frequent references to simplicity in social media debates is perhaps one of the most surprising results of the China Value Index. The growing complexity of the modern business world apparently also impacts on the younger generations in China.

China is experiencing new trends and witnessing constant changes in lifestyles and consumer habits. Bike sharing is a mega trend and garbage separation is now practiced in China's big cities, strongly supported and monitored by city governments.

Perhaps young generations in China and in Europe have more in common than what we would expect when reading editorials on the threat of China's growing influence and confrontational geostrategic ambitions. What we have in common could be a point of departure for the dialogue of civilisations. The grand global challenges of today, such as climate change, the eradication of poverty, and the spread of diseases, require joint action at all levels based on dialogue and better mutual understanding. Business and civil societies can make contributions to this end.

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